Chapter 64 (Arc 2 Chapter 18) Captivating Beauty

We had hours to warm up, and I was fighting second this time, knocking Pascal down to third.  Since the barracks were adjacent to the yard, we got to see the massive and fancy Harbinger ship land.  The Harbinger class ship was the mainstay of the Skyholme navy, but this one was a renovated ship with no weapons.  I guessed it was either owned by the academy, or one of the students had connections.

The other academy students who exited were an array of individuals with the exact same uniform.  White with gold trim.  It made our motley crew look like a bunch of refugees.  I steamed a little since this was an intimidation tactic, and it was working.  I could see uncertainty catching.

I sighed and spoke, “Looks like they couldn’t decide what to wear, so one person chose it for them.  I hope they all have the cleanliness spell, too, because they are all going to be eating dirt when they fight us.”  Mia chuckled first.  It got everyone going.  So as they approached the yard, my group was all snickering and giggling at them.  The only real way to ensure we maintained confidence was for Gareth and me to dominate our opponents.

I moved next to my friend, “Gareth, end it quickly.  No playing with your opponent today.”  He looked a little perturbed, so I explained it to him, “We need to break their morale.  That means we need to show them how outclassed they are.”  He nodded in understanding.

We continued stretching, and they had some really handsome and beautiful members of their academy.  I guessed maybe magic could buy looks for Skyholme’s elite.  Wait, most of them were wearing makeup.  Really?  I was speechless.

The spectators from the capital island came from the Harbinger ship and other skyships docking.  They traveled really well with a sizable crowd that was easily going to dwarf ours.  It was going to be standing room only very quickly.  I nearly started laughing when I saw Freya selling meat on a stick and sending her runners for resupply.  She was going to make a killing today.  If she was smart, she should charge triple the price to visitors.  Even at that price, they would think the food cheap.

Things got interesting when we got a closer look at our opponents. Gareth was facing a massive dark-skinned male around my height. He moved with a fluid speed as he sped through sword forms in his warmup.  He was impressive, and I noticed Gareth side-eyeing him.  My opponent was a woman.  She was tall, maybe 6’1”, and was wielding a staff.  She had a platinum blonde ponytail with red highlights that whipped around as she did a warmup routine.  Studying her, I noticed her lower body had power, she was extremely effective in adding speed to her staff with her narrow hips.  Her flexibility was on par with mine. She performed a split when she saw me tracking her and smiled at me teasingly.

I think it was another intimidation tactic, so I did a high kick and held myself in the pose for a few seconds before transitioning into a rotating back kick with the other leg.  This got a lot of stares from our visitors and claps from the stands by the locals.  It was not a difficult move to do without a target.  Gareth seeing how well they received my effort was quickly put on a display of backflips, kicks, and rotations. Faster, stronger, and with more grace than I had shown.  Gareth’s demonstration was made scarier by the fact he was so large. My opponent focused on Gareth with obvious fascination.  I admit I was jealous as the bright blue eyes of the staff wielder remained locked off Gareth.  Whoever she was, she was a beauty.

As the warmups finished, we had maybe 1500 spectators, with more locals trickling in as they closed their businesses for a few hours to watch.  The opposing academy took off their bright white and gold uniforms to reveal tight-fitting gray clothes underneath.  These clothes were just loose enough not to show their muscles flexing, I noted. This was very clever, and Callem’s sour face made it clear he was not happy.

Callem, being the head of the host academy, got the inter-academy tournament going, “Thank you all for attending a display of the great youths of Skyholme as they forge their skills in the first year of the academy. I thank our guests for being gracious to come out to our humble school and compete with our students. The first duel….” Callem continued and listed off all the pairings. The visiting school only brought their top students, enough to match against us evenly.

Gareth was in the center with his opponent. The match was started, and neither moved for seconds. Then Gareth attacked two-handed and switched to one-handed a few breaths later. His opponent parried the first three strikes but missed Gareth’s punch when he went one-handed. The solid connection could be felt by the thud and flow of blood from the boy’s nose. Gareth didn’t give him time to recover. Gareth quickly went to two hands, chopping at his legs. The boy tried to retreat but just deflected Gareth’s sword into his own shins. Bone and blood were produced as he toppled with a grunt. The match was called in Gareth’s favor, and there were some stunned people in the crowd.

My opponent was extremely concerned and moved to the fallen boy. I guessed they were a couple. She was definitely too attractive not to have a suiter. It took a few moments for the healer to get the boy stabilized and helped out of the arena. Gareth stood by me, “Was that fast enough, Stormy?”

“Yeah, maybe a little too bloody, though,” I said as I saw malice forming in the opponent’s eyes.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Gareth said. “He had the ability to read my mind for my next move. I had to adlib the entire match and not thinking at all…just letting my body act.”

My mouth didn’t work for a second, then I asked, “How did you know?”

“Instinct. It was one of the tier 2 abilities Callem had been training me to counter. I knew it by how he reacted to my first sequence,” Gareth relayed. That was incredible.

I was being called forward. The pretty blue eyes of my opponent had turned icy cold. I approached and stood across from her, and she rasped, “Your boy toy embarrassed my brother. Now I have to embarrass you.”

So Gareth got the pretty girl angry at me? I said the first thing that came to my head, “So he was just your brother? Does that mean you are single?” Her eyes flashed in confusion before going cold again, and she launched a flurry of attacks.

She was good as she pressed me and had me on my toes. I tried to tease her a little, “You know your eyes are quite beautiful when you are not furious.” My comment spurred her on, and I finally retaliated with some offense of my own. I nearly stumbled as she didn’t block a blow to her knee. I didn’t want to hurt the pretty young woman for some reason. I tried to pull my strike and thankfully did. As I connected with her knee, my knee buckled instead. Her face turned smug. I was forced to roll away from her counterattack.

The bitch had some type of ability that transferred wounds to the attacker! Thankfully my self inflicted damage was quickly healed. I switched my mentality to just stick exchanges, avoiding body strikes. Her smug visage faded as my limp disappeared in seconds. She disengaged, and her chest was heaving, and she was sweating profusely. I was covered in dirt from my roll and sweat as well. I cast my *cleanliness* spell on myself and smiled at her, “Your makeup is running. I actually think you are more beautiful without it.” Her eyes softened a little from the icy stare.

My plan was to make her mad and wear herself out. If I couldn’t hit her that meant she would either have to exhaust herself or I would have to wrestle her into a submission hold. I was still a little bit weary of getting close to her for the later. She was an exceptionally skilled fighter. She spoke, “Sorry, Storme, but I am ending this now.”

Well, that was not fair. I had missed her name when they announced the pairings, and she remembered mine. “Wait!” I said, and she paused in whatever she had planned. “How about a bet? If I win, you have to take me on a date. And if you win, I have to take you on a date?”

Unfortunately, she ground her teeth immediately, ignoring my attempt at funny deception. She was a quick thinker, “Do you think I am an idiot!” Her attacks increased in fervor, and I was struck with a blow from nowhere to my shoulder. I scrambled away, and she dogged me around the arena. I was trying to figure out the attack. It was a solid strike with force but not incapacitating. Two more strikes, and she was panting, and her eyes had a look I was familiar with. Aether exhaustion.

Maybe the strikes were a type of telekinetic punch? She was using aether for them. Her other ability must use aether too. So she was running low on aether? I put on a Cheshire grin. This had her pause and step back as she tried to figure out why I was now confident. She had landed a half dozen phantom punches, and I was now smiling.

I cast an alarm spell on the top of my staff. The effect was the bright flash and it would go off when the conditions were met. The conditions were contacting with another weapon. I asked, “I really wish our dance could continue princess but my fellows are anxious for their chance to fight. If you wish to dance again, know that I am amenable.” Maybe she had some kind of charm ability or something similar, but I was enthralled by her beauty.

I moved in, and she blocked my attack setting off the flash. She wasn’t prepared and was blinded while I opened my eyes to see her spinning a defense and retreating. It was too slow, and I engaged. The first two strikes were to her ribs and sternum. The third strike was a knee strike, and I grimaced as her transfer attack ability activated. I gambled with a series of four strikes to her thighs and had no reprisals. I risked flashing the butt of my staff to her forehead and connected, knocking her out cold.

I was declared the winner and walked back to my side of the arena. I did notice her brother giving me a death glare as he joined the healers to help with his sister. I sat with Gareth and asked, “So I missed the names of our opponents. What was her name?”

Gareth’s jaw dropped. “You didn’t even know her name? You were flirting with her the entire time you were fighting!” Gareth looked at her, sitting up, “Tessa. Tessa Torrent. I don’t know how she relates to the Torrent seat on the Triumvirate, but I am guessing she and her brother are being groomed for one of the 23. Both seem to have exceptional abilities. Callem said Tessa had a captivate aura. It just draws attention to her, it doesn’t charm or affect the mind in any way. Not that she needed it with how she looks.”

Pascal’s fight had started, and I half watched the fight, and half watched Tessa as she recovered. She was eyeing me as well without being too obvious. I broke contact and scanned the crowd for my family and groaned. Isla was in the stands with Loriel and Bylura. And…Leda and Cilia were with them. Maybe they had purchased their skyship. Once Loriel made sure I had seen her, she left with her entourage.

I returned to the fight, and Pascal with losing, losing badly. A few exchanges later and it was over with Pascal’s getting healers to fix his smashed hand and shattered elbow. Mia redeemed us in the fourth match, winning a drawn-out combat. From there, we lost the next three duels but all were close contests. The primary reason was our opponents had minor abilities to give them the edge. Our weapon skills were on par with them. We won the next seven contests, Mera and Fera among those wins. The other academy had run out of students with useful abilities for combat. The remaining contests were split evenly, so we ended up winning the day.

When Callem announced the final results, the locals cheered their hometown heroes as the opposing students dressed in their whites and made their way to the ship, they rode in on. I was making my way to the barracks through the crowd when someone tapped me on the back. I figured it was just another townsfolk congratulating me in person, but when I turned the tall blonde Tessa was there, her brother standing behind her like a bodyguard.

She definitely had a captivating aura. Her face was smeared, and hair amess, but I still longed to burn her image into my mind. I cycled my focus exercises, and they worked a little bit, but the fact was Tessa had raw charisma too. Her brother looked extremely agitated at this encounter. She spoke, “If you are ever in the capital, you can find me, and I will take you up on that offer to dance.” She then walked by me without another word toward her ship. Her brother followed with a glare.

I didn’t plan to go to the capital, but I definitely had new material for review in my privacy bubble.

In my room, I cleaned and waited till noon. Everyone else had moved into town for the celebration. My dungeon team was arriving slightly after mid-day for their readings. From the window in my room, I studied my spell while watching the skyship pad. When the blue-green transport landed that I recognized as the one that traveled to only around our island, I got up and headed to meet my team.

I found Callem, Wynna, Ennet, and Aelyn already there talking with Sammie, Remy, and Lana. I was in a good mode, so I came in smiling to the group, “Welcome! Where are we headed to get everything done?”

Wynna replied to the group, “We are going to Ennet’s house. We will do the readings there. Then Callem is going to set them up at the farm for the week.” My mind skipped. The farm? I still had not approved of Lana as a porter. I pretended I knew all this already.

“That sounds great. I can cook while everyone is getting their reading,” I said, falling in with the group as they walked. I walked next to Callem.

Callem said, “I am going to work with Sammie for the next week in the mornings and evenings. Elijah and Elora will meet you at Twin Rocks for your nightly training.” And just like that, my day went south. Elijah was an axe master, and I matched poorly against him. He liked to throw axes and switch in the middle of combat from two-hand heavy axe to two one-handed axes. I had healed many a flesh wound to date from his ‘enthusiastic’ training methods.

I started to prepare spaghetti and meatballs. It would take about two hours for the sauce to marinate the meatballs, and the pasta wouldn’t take long. A large arch led to living room, and as I had just laid out my ingredients a knock at the door had Callem quickly moving to open it. Talia was at the door. Wynna started introducing Talia to everyone. I guessed Callem had told Selina, who told Talia that her dungeon team was meeting in Hen’s Hollow.

I yelled from the kitchen, “Is Talia going to the farm too?”

Callem’s bright yellow eyes looked mischievous, “Yes, just for tonight’s session, though. She still has classes in the capital.”

I nodded and thought it was great that Callem had taken such an interest in preparing my dungeon team. Maye, a little more heads up would be nice, but I trusted him.

Wynna was speaking loud enough for me to hear as I mixed the egg, ground beef, bread crumbs and spices together. “So readings are private. Everything on your sheet will be known only to you. After you finish reading it, you can go and talk with Storme, your employer.”

Sammie asked a question, “But if he is paying for the reading, why doesn’t he get to see everything on the sheet?” Good question! Yeah, why Wynna?

“Storme knows readings are private and is trusting you to tell him what you think is necessary. Now who is first? We will go into the sunroom,” Wynna finished.

Sammie was first, and as I was rolling out the meatballs, she came into the kitchen, and I paused, waiting for her to talk. She just put the sheet in front of me to read. “Trust right?” she said. I nodded and looked at it. I noticed Callem looking through the large arch with eager eyes.

“Don’t tell Callem what is on your sheet,” I said loudly enough for him to hear. “Only if he guesses correctly can you confirm it.” She nodded with solidity. I liked her. I studied the sheet.

***Abilities***

*Focused Strike, Tier 1*

*Power of One, Tier 1*

*Wyvern’s Heart, Tier 2*

*Harmonize with Wood, Tier 1*

***Traits***

*Adaptive, Tier 1*

*Strong Bones, Tier 1*

***Affinities***

*Axes, Tier 1*

I hopefully kept my face impassive as I read the sheet to irritate Callem. I took the paper and put it on the stove, letting it burn up in the magical heater. I was getting the sauce ready next so it was already lit. A person usually had just one ability at tier 1. Sometimes it took some effort to find a use for it. Two-tier 1 abilities were still common. But three tier 1 abilities…that was rare. And on top of that a tier 2 ability? Sammie was special.

*Focused Strike* just doubled the power of a single attack. Not powerful but it had a short cooldown of 30 seconds and used almost no aether. Since Sammie did not have an awakened core that was good news for her. *Power of One* was useless in a group setting. It was similar to Aelyn’s duelist ability. When Sammie fought by herself, she would experience a slight increase in all physical traits.

*Harmonize with wood* was a sculpting ability. She could use it to mold wood with her mind. It was tier 1 and only affected a small area so no making furniture or building skyships. But she could make small things like small sculptures and objects. It used aether and her pool was small, so she couldn’t make much.

I knew most of the tier 1 abilities as Gareth, and I had studied books on them. Tier 2 abilities were very rare, and I think *Wyvern’s Heart* was an endurance ability. Her traits were her genetic characteristics. *Adaptive* was common for humans, and *strong bones* meant she had dense bones that were hard to break. Not bad at all for a future tank!

“Sammie, everything looks great. Remember, don’t tell Callem until he guesses correctly.” She nodded emphatically. “Callem will help turn you into a strong front liner. You have all the tools, and I am happy to have you on my dungeon team.” She beamed at the praise and looked longingly at the food I was preparing. Thankfully I was prepared enough for 10 people.

Sammie went to sit down, and I was actually excited to see what other secrets Remy and Lana held.